

# Transcript

00:00:00 Speaker 1

Welcome to Peers Like Me, a podcast hosted by Western New York Independent Living (WNYIL). Today our guest is Renee Law-King, program manager of the Renewal Center. Our host is Maura Kelley, the voice of the individuals WNYIL serves. Peers Like Me podcast is a regularly broadcasted podcast which educates, empowers and enlightens our communities understanding of those who have behavioral health barriers and how the utilization of various skills, techniques, services and supports results in those impacted living, fulfilling community membership and participation.

00:00:35 Speaker 1

Peers Like Me podcast is based on the belief that those who live with disabilities have the right to choose, advocate, and understand everything about living in their own lives. About today's guest Renee Law-King is the program manager of the Renewal Center in Buffalo with Mental Health PEER Connection, a member of the WNYIL family of agencies.

00:00:55 Speaker 1

Renee has managed the Renewal Center since its grand opening in 2018, when it was originally located on Elm Street in Buffalo. In 2023, the Renewal Center joined a partnership of crisis diversion agencies and began a co-location at the Kristen Vincent Recovery and Respite Center, 111 Maple St. in Buffalo.

00:01:15 Speaker 1

Renee has spent over 20 years providing human services to those in need. She has rich experience in working with people with developmental disabilities, HIV AIDS, those with mental health and addiction issues.

00:01:28 Speaker 1

Renee was honored with an Employee of the Year Award and the Quiet Conquerors Award. Renee is most applauded for her tenacity and bravery in keeping our Renewal Centers safe and in operation throughout the turbulent COVID epidemic. Managing the various administrative adjustments and being a valuable support and guide in the location change that occurred in 2023. The favorite part of Renee's work is her ability to use her own struggles relating to trauma and personal barriers to help those who are seeking support by freely sharing her recovery and skills she uses to live through personal struggles and trial.

00:02:05 Speaker 3

Hi, my name is Maura Kelley. Welcome to the Peers Like Me podcast. Today our guest is Renee Law, the program director of the Renewal Center at 111 Maple Street in Buffalo, NY Renee Law, welcome to peers Like Me Podcast.

00:02:23 Speaker 2

Thank you.

00:02:26 Speaker 3

So, who's Renee Law? Who's Renee?

00:02:28 Speaker 2

Well, I am the program manager for the Renewal Center. I work for Mental Health PEER Connection which is part of WNYIL family of agencies.

00:02:43 Speaker 2

And I've been with the Renewal Center for six years.

00:02:46 Speaker 3

And when did the Renewal Center start? When?

00:02:49 Speaker 2

2018 January of 2018.

00:02:52 Speaker 3

So that was 6 years ago. So, you've been here since the beginning.

00:02:56 Speaker 2

Yes, I've been here since the beginning. We started off at Restoration Society, 327 Elm St. and it was this beautiful living room area, one room and this big building.

00:03:12 Speaker 3

So, you walk into the, off the parking lot into the Restoration Society and you go upstairs, and you go into this room called the living room, the Renewal Center versus today.

00:03:24 Speaker 2

Yes.

00:03:29 Speaker 2

Well, at one time we were called the parlor.

00:03:32 Speaker 3

Oh, really? OK.

00:03:34 Speaker 2

It's a lot of history, right? So, we were called the parlor at one time and at that time the staff and I kind of said we need to come up with a new name. So, we got together and that's how the Renewal Center came.

00:03:35 Speaker 3

OK. Yeah, yeah.

00:03:52 Speaker 3

So, the staff consisted of people with peer staff, that felt like maybe the parlor wasn't a great name. So, we said if we don't feel like it, we need to do something about it.

00:04:07 Speaker 3

So, people that use services came up with the name.

00:04:11 Speaker 2

Yes, we worked together, came up with that name and it's been that name ever since.

00:04:16 Speaker 3

So, what does the Renewal Center do? What is it?

00:04:19 Speaker 2

Well, the Renewal Center is to help people to not have to go to the hospital, to not be traumatized by people, by the hospital setting that don't need to be.

00:04:24 Speaker 3

OK.

00:04:30 Speaker 2

A lot of people just need to talk about their circumstances with people who have gone through some of the similar situations that they have.

00:04:32

OK.

00:04:43 Speaker 3

In the old location, you walked up the stairs and into this room. What's this new location like? Is it a room?

00:04:54 Speaker 2

Well, the new location is the Kristen Vincent Recovery and Respite Center, right? So, this is a stand-alone center. This is a center that has a has everything to do with diversion services. So, we have respites we have.

00:05:01 Speaker 3

Oh, OK.

00:05:14 Speaker 2

You know, Spectrum Health Services that has peer staff that do the same thing, everyone has diversion services in this building.

00:05:24

So, what has happened from six years ago to today? Who are you seeing? How is the whole concept transformed? You've been part of the whole beginning to now the current.

00:05:40 Speaker 2

So, coming into this six years ago, it was Restoration Society, WNYIL and Recovery Options. But at the time it was Housing Options Made Easy. So, it started off with those three agencies and then it just kind of morphed over to three years to one agency which is MHPC.

00:05:59 Speaker 3

Right.

00:06:12 Speaker 3

And it's at the Kristen Vincent Recovery Center. Who is Kristen Vincent?

00:06:18 Speaker 2

Is, well, Kristen Vincent was my supervisor at the time, and she was an amazing director.

00:06:28 Speaker 2

And actually, we talked about these things, and she said, you know what? I listened to staff. And she said don't think that I'm not, I'm working things out. And then all of a sudden this Kristen Vincent Center came about.

00:06:47 Speaker 3

Yeah, and there's a big celebration. Last year, the grand opening.

00:06:52 Speaker 2

Yes, the grand opening.

00:06:54 Speaker 3

So, people don't like going to the emergency room for mental health issues. For the most part, many people don't know what to do because the emergency room isn't the place for us. It isn't. So, what can the Renewal Center do to help us out so that we don't have to think that our only option is the emergency room to get help.

00:07:18 Speaker 2

Well, I think what we have to do is do more to mobilize our services because I think the first thing people think is 211 or Crisis Services or ECMC, they think of those things. So, I think that over the years with us mobilizing this and pushing it more into the community, people are more aware that we do have this Renewal Center.

00:07:50 Speaker 3

What do you mean by mobilizing?

00:07:52 Speaker 2

Getting our information out there so they know that this is an alternative. You don't have to go to the emergency room.

00:08:00 Speaker 3

OK.

00:08:02 Speaker 3

So, what if I was to use this place?

00:08:05 Speaker 3

What would I encounter coming in here? Would I have to make sure I only have paper products on me? You know like this?

00:08:13 Speaker 2

So, Maura, what do you think when you come in?

00:08:16 Speaker 3

I mean, it's a beautiful space. There's not one white object or sterile cleaning object. It doesn't smell like, like, sterile. Whatever. I don't see any IV tubes or any cabinets or, you know, I don't even see a blood pressure cup. I'm sure you have one.

00:08:41 Speaker 3

There are dishes, yes.

00:08:44 Speaker 2

It's like being in your own home.

00:08:47 Speaker 3

Oh, and there's a fireplace. We were just sitting in front of a fireplace. It wasn't a real fireplace, but...

00:08:55 Speaker 2

Right. So, people come here, they love the environment. A lot of times people say I wish I had known about this before I went to CPEP or coming out of CPEP, they say, wow.

00:09:09 Speaker 3

Right.

00:09:10 Speaker 2

Really didn't get my needs met the way I needed it to there.

00:09:16 Speaker 3

So, I know people such as myself struggle with all right, CPEP is not the answer.

00:09:25 Speaker 3

I don't have an answer. I'm miserable. I don't know what to do. I know CPEP isn't the answer. What can I do.

00:09:33 Speaker 2

Then we're going to come to the Renewal Center. You know, so that you're going to meet with certified peer specialists.

00:09:39 Speaker 3

OK. Can I just come? Can I just like, do I have to bring my pajamas or, can I wear a bra? Like, you know, at CPEP, that's questionable. So, that kind of thing?

00:09:56 Speaker 2

Well, you can come in. This is a walk-in. This is a free service. We're open from 12 noon to 12 midnight, we do have transportation to get people here to utilize.

00:10:08 Speaker 3

You're open every day, every day, even leap year day, every day, Friday nights?

00:10:13 Speaker 2

They don't close on holidays. Every day.

00:10:18 Speaker 3

So, what do you do here? What if I come in? What can I expect?

00:10:22 Speaker 2

Well, you're going to expect greeting people with a smile, people that are warm, people that say what brought you here today? We're going to offer you a cup of coffee. Sit you down in front of the fireplace.

00:10:42 Speaker 3

Is it a Styrofoam cup?

00:10:42 Speaker 2

We have actual coffee cups, and you know, we're going to just talk about what brought you here. What are their circumstances, you know?

00:10:55 Speaker 3

And you have a kitchen with a dishwasher. So OK, so it's sort of homey.

00:11:06 Speaker 2

Yes, it's very home. Yes. So, you're going to meet with peer certified peers, people that are going to listen.

00:11:21 Speaker 2

Not judge. We don't judge people. We don't try to direct people and what they should do with their circumstances. We meet people where they are.

00:11:33 Speaker 3

So, I was just at an outreach and engagement event yesterday, and this one agency didn't want to share anything about their staff because of security reasons. And I don't think I am a threat. But they didn't want the community to know anything about them.

00:11:51 Speaker 3

What about your staff? Is that top secret? Like you're just, people. It seems that because of fear, whether unknown or known, people do not want to share. Like anything personal, even though we're humans, we crave that.

00:12:11 Speaker 2

Well, here, that's the that's part of what we do. We share our lives, our, our stories, our dark moments.

00:12:23 Speaker 2

And we share how we can get out of those dark moments. What are we doing now to maintain, like, look at me, I'm here, I'm working and I'm making a life for myself.

00:12:38 Speaker 3

So, you hire people that have gotten out of those dark moments.

00:12:42 Speaker 3

So, what I found is that it's really hard to fake if you're not out of the dark.

00:12:52 Speaker 2

People know when you sit down and talk with people, they know, they know.

00:12:56 Speaker 3

Right. So, it's authentic here.

00:13:00 Speaker 2

Very authentic, very authentic. And outside in different agencies, they don't allow you to talk about yourself. But this is what people get hired for is to share.

00:13:15 Speaker 3

So, they choose this, they choose to share.

00:13:18 Speaker 3

So, it is a different kind of, it is not like a sterile hospital. So, I met with your whole staff a couple weeks ago and they seem to have personality. So, tell me about your staff. Tell me their experience or their knowledge.

00:13:37 Speaker 2



Well, we have people that have come from substance abuse backgrounds. We have an individual that is in a wheelchair; I love that because it's a diversity that we have here. I mean, abuse; I've gone through different abusive situations. So, it's like, we have a hodgepodge of different situations that we can support people with.

00:14:07 Speaker 3

And you do have some needed professionals, as in registered nurses.

00:14:14 Speaker 2

Yes, we do.

00:14:15 Speaker 3

Yes, because sometimes, getting the medical authority is needed, you know?

00:14:20 Speaker 2

Well, one of the things that we, we're going to help people to not have to go to the hospital, right. So, we're going to do the best that we can. We're going to listen; we're going to provide the support. We're going to provide the resources that they need, and the nurses are here to make sure that everyone that's in the space is safe, so they're going to take their vitals and things like that. And if there's some things that come up through their general intakes, they can do some education with them.

00:14:46 Speaker 3

Right.

00:14:57 Speaker 2

If they're not engaged in mental health, they need a primary care doctor. Things like that. We can get them linkage to what they need in the community.

00:15:09 Speaker 3

So, I know I've undergone a few panic attacks and it's like I'm going to die. I'm going to die. And there'd be a nurse, you're not going to die. Breathe.

00:15:22 Speaker 3

It's like, oh, you're someone that has been to school that knows. Yes, you know. And just to hear that. So, you have that here too, that reassurance.

00:15:32 Speaker 2

Yes. And if a person that is in our space building needs to go to the hospital, we have our nurses here that work with the staff, and we make that happen.

00:15:43 Speaker 3

Right, so safety first, but it's so it's like validating, like you really think I should go? YAnd so, you help people make that decision for themselves, right?

00:15:56 Speaker 2

We do not make the decisions for them. We help them to make whatever decision is best for them.

00:16:06 Speaker 3

In making these decisions for our own life, it's very, very difficult and to make that decision for someone else, we do not like that we do not. So, the idea of empowerment and choice is part of that philosophy that you guys have.

00:16:24 Speaker 3

So, you're still working, the staff turnover is a big issue, a big epidemic in our area. But you've been here. So, are you fully staffed?

00:16:36 Speaker 2

Yes, we're fully staffed.

00:16:39 Speaker 2

And actually, the move has been a positive move for the program.

00:16:45 Speaker 2

We have agency providers making referrals into our program family, friends, bringing people in, people getting rides here to to the building. So really this move has been really great. We're doing well with our partners.

00:17:06 Speaker 3

Are the staff that work here that live in this area as well? They live in the Fruit Belt, East Side kind of, or this area, the Medical Corridor area?

00:17:18 Speaker 2

Yes.

00:17:18 Speaker 3

That's good.

00:17:21 Speaker 3

So, people are just coming in from Williamsville to do their, you know, so yeah, it's really the community helping the community so.

00:17:30 Speaker 2

But there's some people from Williamsville that come here.

00:17:32 Speaker 3

That's right. But it's putting economic development in a very harsh, brutal, like, taking advantage community. So, you're replanting or planting seeds that are based on growth. And then Pat Deegan put up this newsletter and how when the seed doesn't grow is, you don't take out the seed, you change the fertilizer. So, the idea of putting the Renewal Center here in you know the East side, the Fruit Belt, in the Medical Corridor, is a new beginning. It's a new way to grow.

00:18:15 Speaker 2

Yes. And really, it's been such a positive.

00:18:20 Speaker 2

The building is a diversion service. It's a diversion center. So, when people come here, they're getting a diversion service. They know that they're getting help to help them to not have to go to the hospital so much.

00:18:41 Speaker 3

So, if I was here and I wanted my provider to know, is there communication that happens? Can there be that communication where hey, will you talk to my counselor about what I did here or whatever?

00:18:55 Speaker 2

Oh, yes. We would love to know if they have a crisis plan, WRAP plans that's established. We want to be able to wrap around. We don't replacement of, or we wrap around the services.

00:19:03 Speaker 3

Right. So, in my past, during a a treatment, an outpatient, intensive outpatient treatment program, at the end of each day, they said, what are you going to do if you have a crisis? Am I'm going to call crisis, would this be an option for people to use like say, well, if I get jammed up, I'm going to go to the Renewal Center?

00:19:34 Speaker 2

Oh, most definitely.

00:19:37 Speaker 2

Really, I am so happy that it's a program like this. The people are very happy that this is a program that is just for them. They're not like a number here, you know, like people come in here, they get their services right when they come.

00:19:51 Speaker 3

Right.

00:19:57 Speaker 2

They don't have to wait all day long to get the help that they need.

00:20:02 Speaker 3

So how long does the person have to wait when they come in the door for services?

00:20:05 Speaker 2

Well, they come on in and we address everybody in the room. But the thing is we prioritize. Let me get this one person situated, you know, let me offer them some coffee. Let me give them something. Would you like to do some adult coloring? Would you like to sit in front of the (unclear), and then we try to make sure that the person that needs the help the most is servicing them.

00:20:32 Speaker 3

But you're not like just saying ok, have fun or yeah, wait. And then what about confidentiality? So, if I come here, who will know about that?

00:20:46 Speaker 2

Well, confidentiality is in the room when people come here. We have them sign documents saying that what is said here stays here.

00:20:58 Speaker 3

OK. And what if that is broken? What if someone...

00:21:05 Speaker 2

Well, I've never heard of that being broken.

00:21:09 Speaker 3

So, you guys are covered under HIPAA, right? The HIPAA law. So, if you break HIPAA, you guys are in..

00:21:11 Speaker 2

Yes, we are.

00:21:14 Speaker 2

Right.

00:21:16 Speaker 2

Yes, definitely. Yes. We cannot break HIPAA. We have people sign things so that if they come here and they're sharing personal, someone may hear what they're saying in the role. But we explain those things to them, and we make sure that they know whatever you hear stays here.

00:21:37 Speaker 3

So, just like in the medical field, like in the hospital, I have a say who has my records or not and that's very important. And that if you violate my confidentiality, this is official health care records, right? Like very serious.

00:21:45 Speaker 2

Right. Yes.

00:21:59 Speaker 2

Everyone has their electronic consumer record. We have them fill out their releases. So, we have those releases on file and if we're going to be communicating with any outside agencies, we have them fill out.

00:22:15 Speaker 3

That I choose?

00:22:17 Speaker 2

That you choose, yes.

00:22:21 Speaker 3

But if you violate my HIPAA, you are in big trouble.

00:22:24 Speaker 2

Oh yes.

00:22:33 Speaker 3

So that's the seriousness of record keeping, confidentiality. So, what if I came here, and I'm in the system. I'm in the field. Am I going to get fired?

00:22:40 Speaker 3

Someone asked me that. Well, I'm afraid to come because I don't want to get fired, but no one would find out.

00:22:46 Speaker 3

Would they?

00:22:47 Speaker 2

No, no. You know what, this service is not for them over there. You know, it's for us.

00:22:51 Speaker 3

Right, right. OK.

00:22:58 Speaker 3

And paying, how much do you charge for this?

00:22:58 Speaker 2

It's free. It's a free service.

00:23:07 Speaker 3

Are you volunteers?

00:23:10 Speaker 2

No, they're not volunteers. I encourage people that is in the workforce.

00:23:19 Speaker 2

Because people are getting stressed out, people are going through a lot in their jobs, so there is confidentiality around what goes on here. It doesn't come out.

00:23:28 Speaker 3

Right. So, I'll just say this because of my background, the New York State Office of Mental Health, the big (unclear) fund, this.

00:23:39 Speaker 3

Because they see, and the government sees that it's a lot less expensive getting services at the Renewal Center than going to the emergency room.

00:23:51 Speaker 3

For even two hours at the CPEP. So that's why they fund it.

00:23:55 Speaker 2

We're contracted to save the county money. We're contracted to keep the community safe and the individual safe.

00:24:04 Speaker 3

So, you are helping out the government and saving money by coming here.

00:24:07 Speaker 3

So that you can put that on your asset list, right. There you go. So, our time is almost up, Renee, is there anything you want to share or anything you want to end with? Maybe how to contact or how to reach out?

00:24:25 Speaker 2

Well, our phone number is 716-245-2400. We are open every day, 12 noon to 12 midnight.

00:24:40 Speaker 2

And if anyone needs to come check us out, see what we are about. They're more than welcome.

00:24:50 Speaker 3

Well, thank you so much, Renee. It's been a pleasure to talk to you. My name is Maura Kelley from Peers Like Me. You've been listening to Renee Law, the program director at Renewal Center with the WNYIL. Thank you.

00:25:05 Speaker 2

Thank you.

00:25:06 Speaker 1

You've been listening to Peers Like Me, a podcast that explores issues related to behavioral health sponsored by WNYIL Inc. with the assistance of the Niagara Frontier Radio Reading Service. Today, our guest has been Renee Law-King, program manager of the Renewal Center. Our host was Maura Kelley.